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Baptism in the bridal chamber

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6. The context of the initiation rite

In the previous chapters, *GPhil* was analyzed in its own right: how is the text structured, what is its genre, does it have a rhetorical strategy, and do its various passages refer to a single initiation ritual? I concluded that *GPhil* can indeed be interpreted as notes for a baptismal instruction. From that startingpoint onward, the next three chapters assess the context of the rite, the social location, and the theological position of *GPhil*.

6.1 Current scholarship

Paul Bradshaw notes a number of pitfalls in the study of early Christian liturgy.¹⁹⁹ First there is the New Testament; it is often unclear whether the practices described reflect the practice at the time of the event described (or what the author believed it had been), or the practice at the time that the work was written (or what the author believed should be the rule). We do not know whether the practice was local, or incidental, or general. References are often selective and emphasize points relevant for the author. Then there is the problem of Jewish origins. We are only starting to appreciate the geographical variety and complexity of Jewish worship. Scholars may try finding the origins of the eucharist in temple sacrifice, Diaspora Pesach meals, Sabbath meals, evening meals, and sectarian practice. Baptismal rites may have been influenced by regular ablutions, Jewish baptismal sects or by proselyte initiation. We often do not know precisely how each of these functioned. Our sources are scarce, and mostly late and biased. They have often been amended, sometimes even under the influence of Christian practices.

If the study of mainstream Christian ritual has its pitfalls, this is even more the case in the study of gnostic Christian ritual, where diversity seems wider and sources scarcer. Previously, we relied mostly on the testimony of Church fathers who denounced these groups. Irenaeus wrote chiefly against the Valentinians and seems to have had little personal knowledge of the other groups he uses primarily to taint the Valentinians by association. Hippolytus is to a large extent dependent on Irenaeus, but has some additional information from other sources. His main aim is to show that these groups practised paganism in Christian disguise, for example he claims that Sethian Gnostics practised Orphic rituals. Epiphanius' ambition is to name and demolish as many sects as possible and he assumes any negative story about them is credible enough to be presented as true, often without any personal knowledge. It seems that some of his sects never existed or appear several times under different names. In other words, these documents need to be read with great care if we are to find anything that both passes the test of historical criticism and at the same time allows for a sensible interpretation.

But now, after the publication of the Nag Hammadi writings, we are in a better position to compare outsider and insider accounts of 'Valentinian' and 'Sethian' gnostic Christians. The problem with these documents, however, is that it is often unclear which sacramental allusions are intended as metaphors and which refer to rituals. If rituals are meant, it is not always clear whether these represent theory or practice, and if the latter, how widespread and representative this practice was. Scholars have only recently begun to address these questions in a historically and

¹⁹⁹ Bradshaw (1992, 2002), *Search*, chapters 4 and 5.

literary critical way.²⁰⁰ John Turner (2000) presents a list of rituals and separately discusses Valentinians, Sethians and ‘others’ on the basis of the Nag Hammadi documents. This is certainly an improvement, and Turner’s treatment is indeed careful. However, within these categories there is still a tendency to find the evidence to match the headings. The information in *GPhil* about the bridal chamber is taken as a Valentinian ritual under this general heading, but the assumption that it is a ritual is not proven by Turner. A better method is to first approach each source in its own right. A good example is *Le Dossier Baptismal Séthien* by Jean-Marie Sevrin (1986), in which he assesses baptismal references in the Nag Hammadi texts commonly designated as Sethian, without forcing the information into a generic structure across diverse gnostic Christian groups. Likewise, Einar Thomassen (2005) first analyzes individual Valentinian sources before drawing conclusions about Valentinian initiation in general.²⁰¹

Given these methodological concerns, my purpose here is merely to position the ritual of *GPhil* in the context of pagan, Christian and gnostic Christian ritual in the second and third centuries. For the purpose of this study, which does not concern precise ritual details and liturgical formulae, some remarkable constants in late antique descriptions of core rituals are important. In the very concept of ritual there is the need to ‘do things properly’. This means that people were looking for an authoritative source, as in the apostolic era, even if that meant that that era had to be constructed retrospectively. Innovations could spread and rituals could be somewhat aligned through the interaction between churches, provided these could claim some kind of authority. The larger social developments also affected both pagan and early Christian ritual in similar ways in various places.

I will first point to some relevant issues regarding late antique initiations in the mystery cults, then give an overview of mainstream and gnostic Christian baptismal rituals and, finally, re-evaluate the testimony of church fathers like Irenaeus and Tertullian.

6.2 Initiations into the Mysteries

Mystery cults and Christianity have a complicated relationship. Already in antiquity the debate was focused on which was the original and which the counterfeit rite.²⁰² A number of scholars have tried to explain Christianity from the perspective of these cults.²⁰³ Others have made insightful comparisons between them.²⁰⁴ However, Bouyer emphasized some essential differences and demonstrated that the Christian mystery

²⁰⁰ This has not always been the case. In his *Gnosis* (1987, German original 1977), Kurt Rudolph presented a number of generic gnostic Christian rituals for which he groups all references under a limited number of headings (pp 226-251). The result is that the testimony of Irenaeus about the various forms of the one sacrament of ‘redemption’ is spread over no less than three completely different rituals, some deemed old and others new. Irenaeus’ remark about some Marcosians who, contrary to Marcus himself, rejected physical rituals, is presented by Rudolph as proof that originally gnostic Christians did not have rituals (p 243). He connects the supposedly five sacraments in *GPhil* with the five seals in Sethian documents and incorrectly calls the five seals ‘chiefly Valentinian’ (p 226).

²⁰¹ Thomassen (2005), *Spiritual Seed*, pp 331-414. His text became available after this chapter had been written, but has been taken into account in the final editing of the text.

²⁰² Cf Justin Martyr. *First Apology* 54 and 66.

²⁰³ Reitzenstein (1927), *Mystery-Religions*; Angus (1924), *Mystery-Religions*.

²⁰⁴ Tripolitis (2002), *Religions*; Finnegan (1989), *Myth & Mystery*; Meyer (1987), *Ancient Mysteries*.

should not be considered just another variant.²⁰⁵ At the same time Burkert emphasized that ancient mystery cults should also be studied in their own right.²⁰⁶

The constant use of Christianity as a reference system when dealing with the so-called mystery religions leads to a distortion as well as partial clarification, obscuring the radical differences between the two.

Ernest Renan once said, 'If the growth of Christianity had been halted by some mortal illness, the world today would have become Mithraic'. Most scholars today agree that there never was a chance for that, since Mithraism was not even a religion in the full sense of the word.

With due caution, therefore, I would like to use insights from those who studied these cults to clarify both the background of and the interaction with Christian and gnostic Christian ritual. In order to limit the scope, I will focus on the following questions that are relevant for understanding the ritual context of *GPhil*: What were the social and religious needs that were answered by late antique mystery cults? Why did so many devotees opt for foreign cults over innovation within their existing religion? What type of reactions did they evoke from the outsiders? How did initiation rituals satisfy the needs of their adherents?

6.2.1 Demand and development

Throughout antiquity, the peoples around the Mediterranean have known gods, festivals and rituals.²⁰⁷ Apparently, before the conquests of the Macedonians and Romans these were predominantly local phenomena. When the Mediterranean world opened up, people noticed differences and similarities that started a process of cross-fertilization and competition. With the 'globalization' of the antique world, people could no longer take local (divine) tradition for granted. Certain 'centres of excellence' became to be recognized. The worship of Artemis was most powerful in Ephesus. The Oracle in Delphi was the best place to consult that most knowledgeable of gods, Apollo. And, to come back to our subject, of all the various harvest festivals the most mysterious was that of Eleusis, reaching into the afterlife. In the words of Tripolitis:²⁰⁸

By the 7th century [BCE], although the celebration of the mysteries retained its relation to the annual cycle of the grain, the mysteries had assumed a different aspect. Demeter not only had power over the fertility of the soil, but also over the human soul.... By the Hellenistic-Roman period, participation in the mysteries was understood as a personal religious experience that had the power to bestow happiness on an individual and assistance through this life and after death.... Individuals from all over the known world sought initiation into the mysteries.

Eleusis was first adopted as such by nearby Athens; its fame expanded as Athens came to dominate the Greek world, and as Hellenism came to dominate the world of late antiquity. While local ritual lost some of its esteem, Eleusis' prestige persuaded the individual of its effectiveness in matters of happiness and life after death.

²⁰⁵ Bouyer (1989), *Christian Mystery*.

²⁰⁶ Burkert (1987), *Mystery Cults*, p 3; also Turcan (1996, 1989), *Cults*.

²⁰⁷ For background see Bear, North & Price (1998), *Religions*; Burkert (1983, 1972), *Homo Necans*; Turcan (2000, 1998), *Gods*.

²⁰⁸ Tripolitis (2002), *Religions*, p 20

At the same time, however, Eleusis became to be affordable only for the happy few, like Cicero, who could bear the costs of initiation and the journey. It could not be performed elsewhere without losing its prestige because the ritual was based on the myth of Demeter and inextricably linked to the locale of Eleusis. But the model of Eleusis could travel and was used by other cults, like those of Dionysus/Orpheus, Isis, Cybele and Mithras.²⁰⁹ What these other cults lacked in prestige, they made up for in another way: community. In the Roman Empire, cities were unhygienic and therefore unhealthy places to live in for most of the population. High mortality rates went hand in hand with a constant influx of new people, detached from their previous social setting.²¹⁰ The worshippers of the new cults in a city could form a new group not dominated by the powerful families of old, which often supplied the city with officials and priests for the established religions. Through the cults, they secured, in their difficult circumstances, the help of a sympathetic deity and people in similar circumstances.

We see these cults gain in popularity when the empire becomes more of a unity in the days of Augustus, after religion has become detached from the polis and differentiated, in the sense that there were more sceptics and devotees at the same time.²¹¹ Although they never involved a significantly large part of the population, by the turn of the second century the mystery cults were visible in most cities. They represented the 'new mood' characterized by a manifold monotheism, the emergence of philosophical 'moral religion', and the idea of the divine origin of the human soul, which could be in communion with the divine.²¹² This lasted until the fourth century CE. After major expansions of the sanctuary in Eleusis in the second century CE, the site fell into disuse towards the end of the fourth century CE.²¹³ The old cult of Dionysius seems to have assumed Eleusian characteristics relatively early. It expanded rapidly in the third and second century BCE and remained popular until the fourth century CE. The popularity of the ancient cult of Cybele reached its height in the second century, despite its far earlier (official) arrival in Rome as Magna Mater. Isis was worshipped throughout the Mediterranean after Egypt had become part of the Hellenistic world and the Ptolemies started to promote their mix of Hellenism and Egyptian religion. She became especially popular in the West, most notably in Italy. Her popularity started to decline in the East in the first century, in the West however, she peaked in the second century. Mithraism came relatively late and flourished from the first until the fourth century. This warrior god provided the opportunity for male bonding and an alternative hierarchy, whereas the Church had trouble allowing soldiers into its ranks.²¹⁴ But the men-only character of Mithras is an exceptional case.

We should not suppose cult members formed close-knit religious communities like a church or synagogue. People could participate in cults as friends and consumers. If they could afford it they could undergo more initiations from several cults. Cults made no claim for absolute religious truth, and there was no teaching for the sake of understanding one's religious and moral precepts. The *hieros logos* of the mystery cults was not comparable to the Holy Scriptures of Jews and Christians.

²⁰⁹ For various reconstructions see Mylonas (1961), *Eleusis*; Kerényi (1976) *Eleusis*; Kerényi (1976, 1967), *Dionysos*; Guthrie (1952), *Orpheus*; Witt (1971), *Isis*; Roller (1999), *God the Mother*; Clauss (2000, 1990), *Mithras*; Ulansey (1989), *Mithraic Mysteries*.

²¹⁰ Stark (1996), *Rise*, chapter 7; Frier (2000), 'Demography'.

²¹¹ Beard (1994), 'Religion'.

²¹² Liebeschuetz (2000), 'Religion'.

²¹³ Mylonas (1961), *Eleusis*, p 155-186.

²¹⁴ Cf. the various conditions and restrictions in the *Apostolic Tradition* 16.17-19

6.2.2 Foreign rites

One of the most striking features of the situation in the second and third century is that, even in the case of Eleusis, most cults attracted people from an origin different from the cult itself. The foreignness of the cult made it possible to associate it with the idea of deeper knowledge and a more ancient, more effective rite than those of local public religions. The Egyptian religion seems especially to have offered a connection with knowledge of the divine more ancient than Greek civilization itself. Herodotus already thought the origin of the Eleusian rites was found in Egypt.²¹⁵

A similar interest in foreignness is found in contemporary literature. We see a host of histories and *bioi*, often about people like Alexander, Cyrus or Apollonius who travelled through various countries, and monographs on other cultures and religions (e.g. Germania, Isis and Osiris). A new genre, the novel, gained considerable popularity and to an extent involved an initiation into the unknown. Many titles either contain the names of the main characters or of the main foreign locales, for example Ephesus, Fenicia, Assyria (if that was in the original title of the *Ninos*), Ethiopia, Babylon, and Thule. All these trends come together in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, which includes the Platonic allegory *Amor and Psyche*. Some understand the work as a literary initiation into the cult of Isis, although Burkert believes this is an overstatement.²¹⁶ Many novelistic *Acts* of various apostles in the second and third century fit in the same literary and social trend. According to Niklas Holzberg, the rise of the novel testifies to a new mood of 'escapism' in Greek culture.²¹⁷ The main aim of the novel is to satisfy the emerging need of ancient audiences to forget their problems and limitations by taking an imaginary journey.

6.2.3 Outsider reactions

While for some people the exotic aspect of a cult was attractive, others perceived it as threatening to the established fabric of the *polis* and the state. Often cults were temporarily banned or restricted, or at least subjected to regulation as in the case of Dionysus' cult by Ptolemy Philopator. Tacitus records in his *Annals* how in 19 CE, the Roman senate tried to expel Egyptian and Jewish rites from the capital. To avoid the political risk of secret gatherings, a general ban on clubs and associations could be announced in certain unruly regions, like in Pliny's Bithynia.²¹⁸

In general, the established temple-based cults like the ones of Magna Mater in Rome and of Demeter in Eleusis were accepted as part of Graeco-Roman culture. Younger cults were often criticized and ridiculed, especially when their followers were predominantly immigrants or from other marginal groups. There is beautiful satire in contemporary literature (e.g. in the *Satyricon* and the *Metamorphoses*). A particularly apt example is the picture that Lucian paints of the initiation rite of Alexander, 'the false prophet':²¹⁹

He established a celebration of mysteries, with torchlight ceremonies and priestly offices, which was to be held annually, for three days in succession, in perpetuity. On the first day, as at Athens, there was a proclamation, worded as follows: 'If any

²¹⁵ *Histories* 2.171

²¹⁶ Burkert (1987), *Cults*, p 66

²¹⁷ See Holzberg (1998), *Roman*, p 47; for general background: Schmeling (1996), *Novel*; Reardon (1989), *Greek Novels*; Harrison (1999), *Roman Novel*.

²¹⁸ Radice (1963), *Letters*, p 18.

²¹⁹ Lucian *Alexander* (pp 38-39, 41-42), translation Harmon.

atheist or Christian or Epicurean has come to spy upon the rites, let him be off, and let those who believe in the god perform the mysteries, under the blessing of Heaven'. Then, at the very outset, there was an 'expulsion', in which he took the lead, saying: 'Out with the Christians', and the whole multitude chanted in response, 'Out with the Epicureans!' Then there was the childbed of Leto, the birth of Apollo, his marriage to Coronis, and the birth of Asclepius. On the second day came the manifestation of Glycon, including the birth of the god. On the third day there was the union of Podaleirius and the mother of Alexander—it was called the Day of Torches, and torches were burned. In conclusion there was the amour of Selene and Alexander, and the birth of Rutilianus' wife. The torchbearer and hierophant was our Endymion, Alexander. While he lay in full view, pretending to be asleep, there came down to him from the roof, as if from heaven, not Selene but Rutilia, a very pretty woman, married to one of the Emperor's stewards. She was genuinely in love with Alexander and he with her; and before the eyes of her worthless husband there were kisses and embraces in public. If the torches had not been numerous, perhaps the thing would have been carried even further. After a short time Alexander entered again, robed as a priest, amid profound silence, and said in a loud voice, over and over again, 'Hail, Glycon', while, following in his train, a number of would-be Eumolpids and Ceryces from Paphlagonia, with brogans on their feet and breaths that reeked of garlic, shouted in response, 'Hail, Alexander!'

...

Although he cautioned all to abstain from intercourse with boys on the ground that it was impious, for his own part this pattern of propriety made a clever arrangement. He commanded the cities in Pontus and Paphlagonia to send choirboys for three years' service, to sing hymns to the god in his household; they were required to examine, select, and send the noblest, youngest, and most handsome. These he kept under ward and treated like bought slaves, sleeping with them and affronting them in every way. He made it a rule, too, not to greet anyone over eighteen years with his lips, or to embrace and kiss him; he kissed only the young, extending his hand to the others to be kissed by them. They were called 'those within the kiss'.

He duped the simpletons in this way from first to last, ruining women right and left as well as living with favourites. Indeed, it was a great thing that everyone coveted if he simply cast his eyes upon a man's wife; if, however, he deemed her worthy of a kiss, each husband thought that good fortune would flood his house. Many women even boasted that they had had children by Alexander, and their husbands bore witness that they spoke the truth!

I have quoted the passage at length because it is a perfect illustration of outsider testimony such as that of Christian church fathers when speaking of gnostic Christian baptism. Lucian emphasizes the sexual immorality of new cults and prophets not because immorality was practised in their rituals but because the priests supposedly took advantage of the faithful against their own teaching. Alexander did celebrate and enact a divine marriage but did not dare to go beyond kissing in public. Behind the scenes, however, boys and women were supposedly seduced. Sex, infanticide, and the drinking of menstrual blood are the standard *topoi* for outsider slander of secret cults. This may be both because of the feminine aspect of the cults (the world of taboo), and because of late antiquity's preoccupation with all things sexual in general. Christians suffered the same criticism, and in their turn levelled the same charges against the 'heretics'. Some, like Clement of Alexandria in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, also ridiculed the established cults. But if we read carefully what he says, he mostly talks about the immorality of what is represented; it seems he has no knowledge of actual sexual acts during the established mysteries, like those of Eleusis. Some of these

features of outsider testimony we will see again in the discussion of Irenaeus' testimony (in chapter 6.5.1 below).

6.2.4 Initiation

It is important to note that initiation into the ancient mysteries was not the same as initiation into a new religion; it was instead a personal experience within the context of one's existing syncretistic pagan outlook. It was not an initiation into a new and exclusive social structure. People used cults, and often more than one, more as consumers and in some cases as club members. The cult was not the primary carrier of social identity. There were many ritual festivals, gatherings and temple rites in which people could participate without initiation into the mysteries.

Since the pagan myths were often well-known, the only way to preserve the experience of the mystery was to keep the rites themselves and the details secret. Without secrecy, the gods would turn against the initiated. For a long time, therefore, our knowledge was based solely on the biased testimony of outsiders. Burkert concludes that there is very little substance in most of the more sensational slander.²²⁰ He rejects the allegations of humiliation and torture (some of it may be true for initiations of soldiers in Mithraism), drugs (only attested for a sanctuary on Crete), sexual immorality (quite a few incidents but hardly anything structural beyond symbolic acts and objects), and cannibalism (only seen in polemics).

Now, with the help of archaeology, we have come to understand more about the mysteries in Eleusis and similar cults.²²¹ The experience of the initiates was intensified by their journey, period of waiting and the cost. They shared their excitement and anxiety with fellow initiates. Their minds were further prepared through purifications and fasting. The initiations often took place in the context of major spring festivals. The real experience took place at night, when a mystagogue guided the blindfolded individual on lengthy walks and through a series of physical sensations: taste, sound and touch. The mystagogue was a personal coach rather than a catechist or priest. A hierophant acted as the master of ceremonies, but the initiate underwent a considerably large part alone in the hands of his mystagogue. A myth concerning the deity and the cult was the backbone of the ritual. In Eleusis a cave served to re-enact the descent into Hades. The sensations became more intense and awe-inspiring closer to the climax of light and bliss. Then the blindfolds were removed and the initiate came to see the light, the divine representations and celebrated them with the other initiates. Sometimes a divine wedding or birth was represented. Altogether the various rituals created a profound impression of harmony with the gods, as benefactors in this life and the hereafter. Initiations were repeatable and could be partaken at lower and higher levels.

In the case of the cult of Isis, the archeological remains yield little information about the initiates. Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is our main – but disputed – source of information. In his account, there are some interesting differences with the mysteries of the Eleusian type. Firstly, the time of the initiation is not linked to a festival but rather to the summons of deity through a dream. The nightly initiation seems to have been an almost completely individual experience. The next morning, Lucius, the main character, is presented to the crowd of adherents and the day is celebrated as his new birthday. During festivals other initiates, men, women and children, are recognizable

²²⁰ Burkert (1987), *Cults*, pp 93-114

²²¹ Mylonas (1961), *Eleusis*; Cosmopoulos (2003), *Mysteries*.

by their white linen clothing. Lucius is initiated into the priesthood and shaves his head in Egyptian fashion. Another two initiates follow.

The Mithras cult, with its seven ascending grades, seems to have functioned as a male-only club whose members shared communal meals in a cave. In contrast to other cults, no women or children were allowed.²²² Advancing through the grades involved other initiation rituals. Regrettably we have little information about these rites.²²³

6.3 Mainstream Christian baptism

At the same time as mystery cults were gaining popularity in Mediterranean cities, Christianity was developing from a Jewish sect into a Christian cult. The process advanced at different speeds in different areas sometimes because of the type of Judaism present, the size of the Christian community, the presence of other cults or because of specific local events and personalities. However, some inter-regional alignment also took place, as the developing Christian communities kept in touch with one another and defined their identity as from pagans, Jews and ‘heresies’ within Christianity.

Initiation into Christianity was achieved through baptism. The key difference with initiation into the mysteries is that baptism sealed entry into a different and exclusive religion and social group. In times of (feared) persecution, the candidates met the full group only after enrolment for baptism. They could only be admitted on the testimony of sponsors and after a time of probation.

But not everything was different. These new converts approached Christianity with similar demands as those that had given rise to the mystery cults: the need for community with their Christian friends and family, the need for a new morality to guide their personal lives, the need for divine assistance in this life and the hereafter, and the need for a personal experience of harmony with the divine. We also see that the exotic character of Christianity simultaneously attracted some people whilst repelling others. Christianity attracted similar criticism from outsiders. If we had only the outsider reports about early Christianity to go on, some of us might now be arguing that Christians practised communal sex and ate human sacrifices.

Most of the information on Christian initiation derives from the baptismal instructions of the fourth century (see chapter 3.2.2). Compared to the relatively unstructured practice mentioned in the New Testament, we can see that a number of developments had taken place during the second and third centuries. The location of baptism had moved to baptisteries in church buildings. It took place at night and had become related to festivals like Easter and Epiphany. Anointing had assumed symbolic importance and the first celebration of the eucharist had become part of the initiation. Additional elements had been added, including salt, candles, milk and honey. Most of these changes make perfect sense in their own right. But it is not mere coincidence that all these changes contributed to making the Christian initiation as ‘awe-inspiring’ as the pagan mysteries. It was the ‘mood of the times’.

We would like to understand how, when and where these developments took place in the second and third centuries. Apart from occasional references, however, our sources are few and consist of very different types of documents with complicated

²²² Plutarch was initiated with his wife in the mysteries of Dionysus, *Consolation to his Wife* 611d. Burkert (1987), *Cults*, mentions a boy initiate who died when only seven years old – despite his initiations in various rites (p 28).

²²³ The so-called Mithras liturgy was probably never part of any of these initiations. See Meyer (1987), *Mysteries*, p 211 ff; Burkert (1987), *Cults* p 68.

editorial histories. The table below gives an overview of our most important sources.²²⁴

Table 6.1

	Syria	Asia / Gaul	Rome	North Africa	Egypt
c. 100	<i>Didache</i>				
2 nd century	<i>Odes of Solomon</i>	Irenaeus*	Justin		
c. 200				Tertullian	Clement
3 rd century	<i>Acts Thomas, Didasalia</i>		<i>Apostolic Tradition</i>	Cyprian*	

* Irenaeus came from Asia Minor to the Rhone Valley, a Greek enclave in Gaul.
I will discuss his views and those of Cyprian in chapter 6.5 below.

6.3.1 Syrian sources

The *Didache* represents an early stage of development²²⁵. There is a brief section on baptism with a preference for outdoor baptism, but if need be water may be sprinkled three times over the head. Candidates prepared themselves by fasting and received ethical instruction. The eucharist is discussed elsewhere, not as part of the initiation, and seems to be regarded as a complete meal. There is no reference to chrism.

A more difficult document to handle is the *Odes of Solomon*.²²⁶ After a century of scholarly debate, this work is regarded as Syrian odes stemming from the second century, and more mainstream than gnostic Christian.²²⁷ The *Odes* frequently touch on baptism, but always in an allusive way. Familiar elements include sprinkling with water, immersion in running water, the seal, signing the name, the metaphor of circumcision, filling up with the Holy Spirit, new garments, fragrance, a bridal crown (an element not appreciated by Tertullian), milk and honey or a cup of mixed milk, drinking living water, and the Lord as nourishment. But we cannot be sure that all of these were actual rituals and not sometimes just metaphors. And even if they all were ritual elements, they were not necessarily all part of the initiation.

Another source from Syria is the third century *Acts of Thomas*. In several instances, Thomas anoints and baptises people and celebrates the eucharist with them privately. The problem with this document is that the narrative is set in the apostolic age. We do not know to what extent its descriptions describe the actual or presumed situation in the first century or the actual situation in the third century. Nor do we know to what extent the rituals in the document, which shows encratic and gnostic Christian tendencies, are representative for Syrian Christianity in general.²²⁸ Often the household setting is taken to belong to the first century, while the pre-baptismal anointing and the frequent link with the eucharist are assumed to reflect second and third century Syrian practice. The emphasis on pre-baptismal anointing in Easter rites is an important difference with Western rites.

²²⁴ For a convenient collection and additional sources, see Finn (1992), *Baptism* (2 volumes).

²²⁵ Milavec (2003), *Didache*; Van de Sandt and Flusser (2002), *Didache*.

²²⁶ Charlesworth (1985), 'Odes'.

²²⁷ See the overview of scholarly opinions in Charlesworth (1998), *Critical Reflections*.

²²⁸ Johnson (1999), 'Epicleses', argues for a 'magical' background of the liturgical formulae.

Our last Syrian source is the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, also a ‘living document’ originating in the third century.²²⁹ At one point, it gives instructions for the appointment of deaconesses. A prime task of these women is the anointing of the bodies of the female baptismal candidates prior to immersion and afterwards. They also instructed initiates during the ceremony. The male bishop, or the person whom he had appointed to baptise, anointed the head of the female initiate by laying his hands on her head.

6.3.2 Justin and Tertullian

Justin Martyr, who came from Palestine to Rome, describes the rite in a setting later and more urban than that of the *Didache*. In his *First Apology* (written around 155 CE), a work addressed to outsiders, we read the following summary:²³⁰

61. Those who are convinced and believe what we teach is the truth, and pledge themselves to be able to live accordingly, are taught in prayer and fasting to ask God to forgive them their past sins, while we pray and and fast with them.

Then we lead them to a place where there is water, and they are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. In the name of God, the Father and Lord of all, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. ...

65. After thus baptizing the one who has believed and given his assent, we escort him to the place where who assembled those whom we call brethren, to offer up sincere prayers ... At the conclusion of prayers, we greet one another with a kiss.

Then bread and a chalice containing wine mixed with water are presented to the one presiding over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of all, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and he recites lengthy prayers of thanksgiving to God in the name of those to whom he granted such favors. At the end of these prayers and thanksgiving, all present express their approval by saying “Amen.” This Hebrew word, “Amen,” means “So be it.” And when he who presides has celebrated the Eucharist, they whom we call deacons permit each one present to partake of the Eucharistic bread, and wine and water; and they carry it also to the absentees.

Here we see the combination of baptism and eucharist, but there is not yet a specific building for the initiation. Although Justin does not mention all the details, he is open to outsiders about the essential elements.

Tertullian in *On Shows* 4.1 states that when entering the water, the candidate professes his faith ‘in the words of its rule’, the creed, and gives public testimony that he or she has renounced the devil. In *On Crowns* 3.2-3 he gives a brief summary of baptism in North Africa around 200 CE:²³¹

When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed,²³²

²²⁹ Bradshaw (2002), *Search*, chapter 4.

²³⁰ Translation Finn (1992b), Baptism, pp 38-40.

²³¹ ANF vol 3. p 94.

²³² It is not clear how immersion took place. A.G. Luiks studied a large number of early Christian baptisteries in northern Africa. Most baptisteries were too small and shallow to accommodate full-body immersion. In those cases, ‘going down into the water’ would simply mean to descend a few steps, coming in from the west. Standing in the water, facing south, a pitcher of water would be poured as a symbol of washing. Thereafter the newly

making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel. Then we are taken up as newborn children, we taste first of all a mixture of milk and honey, and from that day we refrain from the daily bath for a whole week.

We take also, in congregations before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the eucharist, which the Lord both commanded to be eaten at meal-times, and enjoined to be taken by all alike.

The sign of milk and honey is an element not found in Justin's account. Neither account contains a description of the chrism. In this treatise, the description of the eucharist follows baptism, but only as one more tradition that everybody accepts and not with the claim that it was also a part of the initiation as a whole.

In his treatise *On Baptism* 20, however, it becomes clear that the initiates did partake in common worship with the other initiated members of the community after baptism:²³³

They who are about to enter baptism ought to pray with repeated prayers, fasts, and bendings of the knee and vigils all the night through, and with the confession of all bygone sins...

when you ascend from that most sacred font of your new birth, and spread your hands for the first time in the house of your mother, together with your brethren...

Here the initiates worship *for the first time* in the church with other brethren, after ascending from the water. Up to this moment they had remained separate when the community worshipped and celebrated the eucharist. If this first joint worship was taken at the same time as the normal eucharist, then baptism would have taken place before daybreak.

In *On Baptism* 7 and 8, Tertullian describes an unction. He does not call it 'the chrism', but he does compare it with the chrismation of the Hebrew priests, given before the hand is laid on to invoke the Holy Spirit:²³⁴

7. After this, when we have issued from the font, we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction ... Whence Aaron is called 'Christ', from the 'chrism', ...

8. In the next place the hand is laid on us, invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit through benediction.

In *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 8, the order is washing, anointing, signing (with the cross), imposition of hands and, without interruption, eucharist.²³⁵

The flesh, indeed, is washed, in order that the soul may be cleansed;
the flesh is anointed, that the soul may be consecrated;
the flesh is signed (with the cross), that the soul too may be fortified;
the flesh is shadowed with the imposition of hands, that the soul also may be
illuminated by the Spirit;
the flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may fatten
on God.

baptised person would climb out on the east side and enter into the community. Even in somewhat larger baptisteries (in square meters), the water was still too shallow for full-body immersion (some baptisteries contained only 40 centimetres of water). Here the entire group would descend to stand in the water, after which water would be poured over their heads individually. Cf Luiks (1975), *Baptisterium*, pp165-166.

²³³ ANF vol 3, pp 678-679.

²³⁴ ANF vol 3, p 672.

²³⁵ ANF vol 3, p 551.

Tertullian's practice is already quite elaborate, but only the basic outline is fixed, and even with respect to that outline Tertullian is quite aware of the fact that many customs postdate the New Testament (*On Crowns* 3). Some people preferred fasting after baptism (*On Baptism* 20). Tertullian speaks of a font, but all types of water are acceptable (4). After the bishop, presbyters and deacons are the best persons to baptise (provided the bishop consents), but if necessary all male believers are priests (17) who can baptise. People may be baptised at any age, but Tertullian thinks it is safer for children, who will be pardoned anyway, to preserve baptism for forgiveness of sins committed in adolescence (18). The best time is Easter, but Pentecost or any other day will do (19). In the fourth century we see that in Jerusalem baptism took place at Easter, whereas Ephrem celebrated it at Epiphany.

6.3.3 *Clement of Alexandria*

As discussed in chapter 3.2.2, Clement speaks about baptism in the first book of the *Instructor*, but he does not give a systematic account. Previously, scholars believed that Egyptian initiation resembled western initiation, but Paul Bradshaw points to the possibility that early Egyptian practice may have had some particular features, such as the preferred season for baptism. He also doubts whether the references to anointing refer to pre-baptismal or to post-baptismal chrismation.²³⁶

But his evidence is far from conclusive and I would like to point to two passages that Bradshaw did not mention. In the *Instructor* 1.6 (25-52) Clement says that Jesus was 'perfected by the washing of baptism' and 'sanctified by the descent of the Spirit' (25.3). Likewise, those who are baptized have the 'eye of the spirit' free and see 'the Holy Spirit flowing down on us from above' (28.1). This suggests an order of first baptism and then the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is often associated with the unction, as Bradshaw himself states in his article on Alexandrian tradition (pp 96-97).

Clement quotes Paul that 'we are all baptised into one body and we have all drunk of one cup', which may allude to the joint ritual of baptism and eucharist (31.2). Clement has in mind a process of repentance, renouncing and purification in baptism (32.1). Believers stripped off the garment of wickedness, and put on the immortality of Christ (32.4).

Clement also speaks of milk and honey in the promised land and in the 'rest' (34.3 and 36.1). For Clement milk refers to the first lessons of the new-born child and Jesus' flesh and blood to the lessons that follow after baptism (38.1-3). Interestingly, Clement explains the flesh and blood of Christ almost in the same way as §23 of GPhil: his flesh is the Holy Spirit and his blood is his Logos (43.2). In GPhil it is the same pair, but then his flesh is the Logos and his blood the Holy Spirit.

The order of baptism, chrismation and first eucharist may be alluded to in the passage where the Logos is first a 'fountain of life', then a 'river of olive oil' and then 'milk' (45.3). It seems there is a cup of milk mixed with water and honey, after that the milk mixes with wine (51.1). As we see in the second chapter of book 2, a cup of wine mixed with water is used in the eucharist itself.

6.3.4 *The Apostolic Tradition*

The first critical edition of the *Apostolic Tradition* ascribed the work to Hippolytus (Rome, around 215 CE).²³⁷ The authorship has since been challenged and opinion is

²³⁶ Bradshaw (1992, 2002), *Search*, pp 167-168; (1995), 'Alexandrian Tradition'

²³⁷ Dix and Chadwick (1937, 1968), *Apostolic Tradition*.

currently divided.²³⁸ More importantly, however, is the consensus that it functioned as a 'living document' that was updated by later users. This means that we cannot be claim that it exactly describes the situation in the Roman church in the early third century. Having said that, the document itself is refreshingly candid as it was for internal use only. A new point is the claim of apostolic authority for the detailed rites. This is markedly different from Tertullian's careful and modest remarks. The prologue explains why: the rise of heresies made it necessary to record and communicate to other churches what the proper apostolic tradition is. The ritual elements described in 17-23 are as follows:

- If someone wants to become a Christian, he first goes to the bishop, before the community assembles. If accepted he or she receives catechetical instruction from a teacher for three years, but this period may be shorter if the catechumen shows earnest perseverance. When a group of catechumens is chosen for baptism their past lifestyle as catechumens is examined. After admittance, they attend daily to hear the gospel, receive the laying on of hands and be exorcised. The bishop has to perform at least one of the exorcisms. On Thursday the candidates have to cleanse themselves; if a woman is menstruating her baptism must be postponed. From Friday onwards the candidates have to fast.
- On Saturday they assemble with the bishop for prayer, worship and exorcism. After exorcism, the bishop breathes on them (a sign of the Spirit) and then 'seals' their foreheads, ears and noses.
- They spend the night preceding baptism together in vigil, reading scriptures and listening to instructions. They cannot bring any food with them, except what they have prepared for the communal meal of eucharist on Sunday morning.
- At cockcrow they come to the water, over which prayers are said. Likewise prayers are said over the oil for exorcism and the oil for thanksgiving. Children are baptised first, with parents answering for their little ones. To preserve modesty, men and women are baptised separately. The candidates discard all their clothes and ornaments, come forward, renounce the devil and are anointed for exorcism. The candidates then enter the water naked, confess faith in Father, Son and Holy Spirit (in answer to three portions of the creed) and are immersed after each confession. Coming up from the water, the newly baptised are anointed with the oil of thanksgiving, dry their bodies and put on their new clothes.
- Following baptism they come together in the assembly hall. The bishop lays his hands on each of them, prays for the Holy Spirit to fill them and anoints them solemnly: 'I anoint thee with holy oil in God the Father Almighty and Christ Jesus and the Holy Ghost.' He seals their forehead and gives the kiss of peace.
- The newly baptised then join the faithful in prayer, and afterwards exchange the kiss of peace. Then they celebrate their first eucharist. The rite starts with thanksgiving over bread and the cup of wine mixed with water, milk mixed with honey, and water. Each element is explained. When the bread is broken, the bishop gives each a fragment with the words 'The bread of heaven in Christ Jesus.' Then each of them walks up to the presbyters and deacons to drink from the cups they offer: first water, then milk and lastly the wine.

²³⁸ Bradshaw (2002), *Search*, p 80-83. Young, Ayres and Louth (2004), *Literature*, p 83, call it 'an aggregation of material from different sources, quite probably arising from different geographical regions and almost certainly from different historical periods, from perhaps as early as the middle of the second century to as late as the middle of the fourth.' Moreschini and Norelli (2005), *Literature*, p 149, however see the attribution to Hippolytus as 'widely but not universally accepted. There is general agreement, however, that the work derives from Rome in the first half of the third century.'

Interestingly, we see here how after years of ethical instruction there is about a shorter period of instruction prior to baptism in which the candidates ‘hear the gospel’, and a (mystagogical) instruction in the night before baptism and during the first eucharist. In fourth century sources, we often see a period of several weeks of baptismal instruction, and a series of mystagogical instruction in the days after baptism.

6.4 Gnostic Christian baptism

Because of the methodological concerns outlined in chapter 6.1 above, I will limit my discussion here to the three documents that clearly deal with an initiation ritual: *A Valentinian Exposition* (with its sacramental supplements), the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (a *hieros logos*), and the *Second Book of Jeu*.

6.4.1 *A Valentinian Exposition*

The first part of *A Valentinian Exposition* and supplements (NHC XI,2) discloses the gnostic Christian ‘mystery’ of the divine, creation and salvation, spoken ‘[to those who are] mine and [to those who will be mine]’.

The first supplement, of which almost forty percent is missing, is a prayer for a pre-baptismal anointment ‘so that we may be able to trample [upon] the [snakes] and [the heads] of the scorpions and [all] the power of the Devil.’ It is not called ‘the chrism’, but this may be because ‘the chrism’ became a specific pre- or post-baptismal anointment only in or towards the third century. Neither Irenaeus nor the second century *ExcTh* uses the word ‘chrism’ for a specific Valentinian anointing. In mainstream Christianity, the renunciation of the devil was a pre-baptismal rite. The anointment was meant to exorcise, not to convey the Holy Spirit.

The next supplement, again badly damaged, speaks of a ‘first baptism’ for the remission of sins, explicitly connected to the baptism of John. It is unclear, however, whether first baptism was administered in the community of *A Valentinian Exposition*, or that mainstream Christianity was discussed in order to make clear how second baptism is different from it.²³⁹ Neither is it clear whether second baptism consisted of an immersion and/or a chrism, or an immaterial hidden baptism. Unfortunately another lacuna of ten lines follows. This in turn is followed by a new section on baptism, this time connected to the ‘[fellowship] of his Spirit’. The text then seems to summarize what is conferred in first baptism and, but we can only assume this, what is conferred in second baptism. Again 19 lines are missing and therefore we can only speculate as to whether a chrism followed baptism. Finally, there are two prayers for the eucharist. The second, although badly damaged, clearly speaks of food and, as the lacuna is commonly restored, drink.

There is some additional information from Valentinian sources about initiation rituals. The *Tripartite Tractate* sees only gnostic Christian baptism, or full baptism, as a valid ritual. ‘There is no other baptism apart from this alone’ (127.25-30). A confession of faith in ‘God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’ seems present in 127.31; the following lines also speak of ‘garments’ but in a metaphorical way. In the *Tripartite Tractate* baptism is called ‘redemption’, ‘garment’, ‘confirmation’, ‘silence’, ‘bridal chamber’, ‘light’, ‘life’, ‘all that is’, ‘the Totalities’, and ‘is given numberless names’ (127.25-128.34).

²³⁹ See chapter 7.2.4 below under ‘*A second baptism?*’

The *Eclogae Propheticae* 14, following sections about baptism, speaks about fasting and perhaps candidates fasted before the ceremony. In *ExcTh* 84, the existence of pre-baptismal rites is confirmed, like fasts, supplications, prayers, imposition of hands, and kneeling, not unlike mainstream Christianity. *ExcTh* confirm that the initiate ‘has received the power to trample upon scorpions and snakes, [that is] the evil powers’ (76.2, see also 85). Bread and oil are consecrated, as is the water of baptism (82).²⁴⁰ People descend in the water (83). Baptism is dual: in water and in spirit (81.2). Redemption is given in the name in which we are baptised, and the spirit that descends upon us in baptism, in the imposition of hands (22.5,6). Baptism is in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit (76.3) as is the invocation when they are sealed (80.3).

In summary, Valentinian sources speak of initiation as ‘redemption’ and ‘a bridal chamber’.²⁴¹ The ritual elements seem to be the following:

- in preparation, fasting, renouncing the devil and pre-baptismal anointment, also consecration/exorcism of the water and – now or later – consecration of bread and oil
- divestiture, confession in the divine names, baptism, and perhaps new garments
- receiving the Holy Spirit, perhaps through imposition of hands and/or anointing and
- partaking of the eucharist.

This is compatible with the ritual elements found in *GPhil*, although the emphasis on the chrism in *GPhil* is not found in these sources. The fact that *GPhil* does not mention pre-baptismal rites in its mystagogy does not mean that there were no pre-baptismal rites. It is possible that they had already been performed before the mystagogy, and that the mystagogue is now preparing his candidates for what is to come.

6.4.2 *The Gospel of the Egyptians*

Sevrin and Turner both see the *Gospel of the Egyptians* as the most important source for reconstructing Sethian baptism.²⁴² The document itself claims to be *a biblos hiera*, a term that may refer to its use in initiations. This does indeed seem the best interpretation of this rather ambiguous and damaged text. Sevrin also believes that the same ritual is presupposed in the *Apocryphon of John*, *Zostrianos*, the *Apocalypse of Adam*, *Trimorphic Protennoia*, *Melchizedek* and the *Anonymous Text* in the Bruce Codex. All these texts, in their present form, are gnostic Christian texts. Christ is the Son in a triad of Father, Mother and Son, he is the Son of the heavenly Adam (the heavenly Seth, whose seed are the elect²⁴³), and the one who took the garment of the Son of the Jewish God in which he descended on Jesus and appeared in the world as

²⁴⁰ The combination may point to a eucharistic anointing as in *GPhil* §108, pace Thomassen (2005), *Spiritual Seed*, pp 335-336.

²⁴¹ The *Dialogue of the Saviour*, which is not clearly Valentinian, does not describe any ritual but speaks metaphorically of baptism in water and fire (134.1-8), garments (136.22, 138.18-139.5, 143.11-144.1), milk and honey, oil and wine and fruit (130.17-18), and the bridal chamber (138.19-20).

²⁴² It seems to me that Egypt was or became the centre of Sethian Gnosticism. Epiphanius of Salamis wrote that the Sethians of his days, 375 CE, were found nowhere but in Egypt (*Panarion* 39.1.2). This would explain the wealth of Sethian documents found at Nag Hammadi. Plotinus, c. 250 CE, came from Alexandria to Rome; he had his pupil's comment on the books of Zoroaster/Zostrianos that may be related to the document in the Nag Hammadi Library (Porphyry *Life of Plotinus* 16).

²⁴³ The earthly Adam and the earthly Seth were made and named after the heavenly ones, but they are not identical to them (cf. II, I 8.29-9.25; 14.15; 15.1-10; 25.1-2).

an earthly Son of Man.²⁴⁴ However the problem with these additional documents is their genre. None is an actual baptism text or manual and we cannot tell whether ritual references are metaphorical or actual.²⁴⁵ Methodologically, therefore, we should begin with the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and use the other material only for clarification.

The text is preserved in two versions (NHC III,2 and IV,2). Just like *A Valentinian Exposition*, it contains an account of the origins of the cosmos, the work of Seth/Jesus, and a liturgical section with sacramental references. There are divine emanations, including Jesus 'who came and crucified what was subject to the law' and Yoël 'who presides over the name of the being who will be ordained to baptise' (III,65.17-25). Next, in the version of NHC III,66.2-8, the author or speaker refers to the baptismal candidates who are worthy of invocation, of the renunciation(s), of the five seals. They are instructed about the heavenly beings that will receive them during their ascent, and they will not taste death. A key issue here is the understanding of the five seals. Sevrin concluded after lengthy considerations that Sethian sources speak of a fivefold immersion. Turner remained undecided. Whatever form it took, I suggest that it concerned first of all the authority of five names. In early Christian literature the word seal is used in many senses, but the most relevant seems to be the connection with the authority of names.²⁴⁶ If one received the seal or signet ring of a ruler (like Joseph in Genesis 41:42) one assumed his authority. The ring carried the cartouche of the pharaoh, the symbols of his name. In the gnostic Christian books of Jeu, we often see how the believer who has the name, or the seal, of the supreme father or mother has authority over the archons that would otherwise capture him or her during the ascent, cf. also *ExcTh* 80.3. The names could be given in an anointing or in immersion or without any ritual. In Hippolytus' account of the Marcosians, the name was whispered into the ear. Mainstream Christian baptism in the Trinity is often spoken of as baptism in the name (singular) of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The divine Son of Man in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* says:

He who possesses the five seals of these particular names has stripped of the garments of ignorance and put on a shining Light. ... And I proclaimed to them the ineffable Five Seals in order that I might abide in them and they also might abide in me. (XIII,1 50.9-12)

²⁴⁴ The general story is given in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*. The other documents can be read from this perspective.

²⁴⁵ Most documents only allude to baptism in passing. *Zostrianos* is the only other document in which baptism plays a prime role. It speaks of a ceremony of seven washings/baptisms (VIII,1 4.20), five in the name of the Autogenes and two by Yoël, but these are administered in the course of a heavenly ascent, not on earth. An earthly baptism, however, is referred to at the end in the relatively damaged discourse of Ephesekh.

²⁴⁶ Other uses include the following three:

- An item could be marked with a sign of its destination. Paul likens the experience of the Holy Spirit today as God's sign that we will receive full glory in the future.
- The sealing in the sense of closing a house or grave, or sealing a jar containing food with solid oil for purposes of conservation. If a person is exorcised, this is sometimes likened to the cleansing of a jar or a house. Baptism is sometimes called the seal of the spirit in the sense of Matthew 12:22-45. Only when we ask the Holy Spirit to fill the jar or house of our soul can we be sure that the evil spirits will not return. This image and this seal are explicit in the *Gospel of Truth* (36.21) and the *Eclogae Propheticae* (12). In this sense a fivefold sealing might involve anointing the five senses through which we otherwise might be defiled by the world we live in.
- The sign of the owner, like a brand on cattle. This metaphor is used in *ExcTh* 86.2. Circumcision and baptism have often been described as the sign of the owner, through which the believer is both subjected and protected. Other powers will not touch him. Over time the cross became the mark of Jesus and the sign of the cross made with water, oil or only by finger movements symbolized sealing with his name. Receiving the name of Christ could be symbolized through post-baptismal chrismation. Receiving the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit came to be symbolized by a threefold immersion or sprinkling with water.

The question is of course which particular names are intended. The *Gospel of the Egyptians* seems repeatedly to praise not five but *six* divine persons:

- the Father: uninvoked, unnameable,
- the Mother: the male-female virgin Barbelo,
- the Son: the thrice-male (very male) Christ, Telmaël-Telmakhaël-Eli-Eli-Makhar-Makhar-Seth, the Autogenes,²⁴⁷
- the Virgin: the male-female virgin Youel, and
- the Child of the Child: Esephech (the messenger of God, the Son of the Father, the Perfect Man).²⁴⁸
- The Doxomedon aeon(s), in the version of Codex IV sometimes replaced by the Coptic expression 'giver(s) of praise' and once mentioned as the third in line.

The question now is which five names are referred to. Perhaps, the last term is not a personal name, but rather a setting: the praise-giving aeon(s). The commentators in the *Coptic Gnostic Library*, Alexander Böhlig and Frederik Wisse, see the number of five made up from the thrice-male child plus Youel and Esephech. Whatever the solution, with the generation of Youel and Esephech, who form the bridge between the ultimate divine and the believers, it is explicitly stated (IV,2 56.20-27), that 'it' was completed.

It is possible that the first three steps describe the physical rituals of initiation. (1) Grace was received through invocation, (2) the initiate was baptised through immersion and (3) received the five seals, i.e. the names, at the same time, through quintuple immersion or any other symbolic ritual. The names open the gates for the soul in its ascent, either to the inner world or in the afterlife. The closing section is a lengthy baptismal hymn, of which some parts may refer to the ceremony:

O living water, O child of the child, O glorious name...
 This great name of thine is upon me, o Autogenes...
 I have armed myself with an armour of light...
 For the Mother was at that place...
 I have stretched out my hands while they were folded.
 I was shaped in the circle...
 Yours, O Jesus! Behold, O eternally omega, O eternally five, O Jesus! ...
 Therefore the incense of life is in me.
 I mixed it with water...

The armour of light prior to baptism may refer to pre-baptismal anointing of the body, shining in a candle-lit baptistery. The image of the Mother 'at that place' reminds one of the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters. The person stretches out his hands, perhaps in the shape of the cross, as already discussed in the *Odes of Solomon*, to renounce and crucify the world, then brings his hands together in a circle above his head and is immersed. The incense of life is the Holy Spirit, which may already have been conferred in the pre-baptismal anointment. The oil mixes with the water. Possibly consecrated oil was used to consecrate the water (as in Pseudo-Dionysius²⁴⁹), but I doubt whether that is consistent with the idea that here it is the initiate who mixes the oil and water. More likely, fragrant oil was used in pre-baptismal

²⁴⁷ Adamas is 'the eye of the Autogenes', his son is Seth.

²⁴⁸ *Zostrianos* VIII,1 13.7-11

²⁴⁹ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 2.2.7

anointment to represent the fire and to invoke the Holy Spirit. Upon entering the water the initiate mixed the oil with water, as is also related by Ephrem Syrus.²⁵⁰

Additional information from the third part of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* confirms the idea of pre-baptismal anointment. The initiate, in a ritualistic or metaphorical sense, (i) drank living water, was (ii) stripped, (iii) clothed in shining light (pre-baptismal anointing?), *after* which he or she was (iv) covered with a robe, (v) immersed, (vi) enthroned, and (vii) glorified. *Zostrianos* suggests that this was done through crowning, an element known from the *Odes of Solomon* and Ephrem. The eucharist is nowhere part of the initiation.

In summary, sources designated as Sethian seem to presuppose a baptismal ritual that has some resemblance to early Syrian baptism. This baptism, however, was not carried out in the names of the traditional trinity but in the fivefold divine names. The initiation ritual as a whole is not compatible with the one forming the basis of *GPhil*.

6.4.3 *The second Book of Jeu*

The mysteries in the third-century *Books of Jeu* are much more elaborate than the ones discussed above. They are similar to the rites in the *Pistis Sophia*, which explicitly refers to the two *Books of Jeu*. Even more than in *Zostrianos*, we see elaborate series of inner mysteries through which the soul can ascend to God. It is Jesus who reveals this to his disciples. Before they can engage in these spiritual exercises, they ‘should perform the mystery of the forgiveness of sins only once’.²⁵¹ If they have received this mystery, the watchers of the gates will let them through to enter the heavenly mysteries. The mystery of forgiveness consists of three lower mysteries: (1) baptism by water, (2) baptism by fire, (3) baptism by the Holy Spirit.²⁵² After that come: (4) the removal of the evil of archons, and (5) the spiritual chrism. The three baptisms and the ‘removal’ are described as elaborate rituals, but the last mystery seems to be a spiritual journey, passing numerous aeons, watchers, each with their own mysteries. All four rituals follow almost the same pattern, as does so much else in the *Books of Jeu*.

- (i) Jesus makes an offering.
- (ii) All are clothed in linen garments (like traditional Egyptian priests).
- (iii) A herb is placed in the mouth.
- (iv) Jesus gives them a cipher.
- (v) The disciples are placed before bread and wine, with their feet together.
- (vi) Jesus crowns them.
- (vii) He seals them with a specific sign.
- (viii) He turns them to four corners.
- (ix) Jesus prays and a miracle sign happens.
- (x) He baptises them.
- (xi) He gives them bread and wine.
- (xii) He seals them with another sign. There is no chrism mentioned apart from the final spiritual chrism, but oil may have been used for sealing.

²⁵⁰ ‘Oil in its love accompanies the baptised in his need, when, despising his life, he descends and buries himself in the water; oil by nature does not sink, but it accompanies the body it has sunk its mark into.’ *Hymns on Virginity* 7.10.

²⁵¹ II *Jeu* 104.1-3

²⁵² II *Jeu* 102.6-11; cf. *Pistis Sophia* 246.

In the baptism by water the offering is a pitcher full of wine.²⁵³ After Jesus' prayer it is turned into water, with which the disciples are baptised, probably without full immersion. In the baptism by fire the offering is incense; the miracle is the sudden appearance of the water for baptism. In the baptism by the Holy Spirit incense is offered again, but the miracle remains unspecified. In the 'removal' the disciples have to build an altar for the incense.

Although the descriptions are relatively clear, we should be careful. The genre of these books is clearly not that of a manual. The seemingly tedious repetitions are typical of certain types of mystical literature, such as for instance the Jewish *Sefer Yetsirah* (3rd-6th century). Nevertheless, the general outline, steps (i) to (xii), may go back to the format of an initiation ritual not unlike the rituals we have discussed so far. If it is, then we see that for these later groups a type of eucharist follows upon baptism. The *Pistis Sophia* even quotes from the New Testament the words of the institution.

These later documents also show another interesting trend: there are far more traditional Egyptian elements than in earlier Sethian or Valentinian documents.²⁵⁴ The linen garments were required by Egyptian religion (and also in the Isis cult) for reasons of purity. The 'characters' of the names of *Jeu* resemble pharaonic Egyptian cartouches. Many seals are variants of the cross, as the Chi-Rho also is, with which Christians used to sign the name of Jesus Christ. Some have resembled hieroglyphics. The gates to the divine with their watchers look like the temple pylons that needed to be passed in order to enter the divine presence in the holy of holies. The same image is recognizable in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (which prefigured later Hellenistic-Egyptian ascent schemes). Egyptian deities, like Typhon (also seen in Sethian texts), are included in the lists of Archons.

In summary, the initiation ritual has a Christian pattern, but combined with other elements. It is not clear whether these rituals were enacted in practice or were only intended for mystic contemplation. They are not compatible with the rite in *GPhil*.

6.5 Valentinian ritual and mainstream Christian polemics

When Marcion set up his own 'church' in the mid-second century, he did not do so because he missed certain things in the larger church but because he wanted to purge it of Judaism. Valentinus tried to stay within the church, with its scriptures and rituals, but wanted to give them a different interpretation. The starting point for Marcionite and Valentinian rites was the ritual of their church or a conscious adaptation thereof.

So far, our analysis of insider testimony has revealed no major deviations in Valentinian ritual. How can this be reconciled with the many scholarly suggestions to the contrary that I discussed in 6.1 above? I believe that this is at least partly due to the fact that their reconstructions have been 'conditioned' by outsider testimony. Most of that is based on the testimony of Irenaeus (some forty years after Valentinus). Irenaeus' mission was not to give an adequate representation of the various sects to modern scholars, but rather to keep his flock from associating with these sects. To

²⁵³ The first baptism is nearly repeated in *Pistis Sophia* §375-376, while the other two are only referred to.

²⁵⁴ This confirms David Frankfurter's hypothesis that around this time traditional Egyptian priests adopted, or adapted to, the fast-growing Christian religion: '... *Jeu*'s proximity to the ancient mortuary "guides" and the apotropaic rites and symbols that tradition involved point to a scribe well-versed in the traditions of such mortuary texts. The shift from a traditional priestly to a Christian Gnostic milieu is then no more radical than the shift from temple to Hermetic conventicle ... Of course, one must take the concept of "shift" in the loosest sense, since the mere fact of conserved tradition in texts like the *Hermetica*, the *Books of Jeu*, and the Coptic grimoires implies more of a reassertion than a transformation of scribal self-definition.' Frankfurter (1998), *Religion*, p 262.

prove that the Valentinians were heretical he had to ascribe to them as many deviant doctrines and rituals as possible.

6.5.1 *The polemics of Irenaeus*

Irenaeus deals with Valentinian ritual in the first book of *Against Heresies*. Its first twelve chapters deal with the problems of Irenaeus' time and place, the growth of Valentinians and among these the followers of Marcus (chapters 13-21). He calls him the Magus to connect him with Simon Magus who was rejected by Peter and John in the New Testament. In chapters 22-24, he tries to paint a succession of heresies from Simon to Menander to Saturninus and Basilides, implying that they were the spiritual fathers of Valentinus. The description of various heresies in chapters 25-31 do not suggest 'succession' but are rather a collection of older and newer heresies to taint Valentinians by association. His main concern is to stop the advance of Valentinianism, most notably Marcus' version of it in his region, as is also clear from his introductions to the other books. Apart from Valentinians and Marcionites, Irenaeus displays no personal knowledge of the other groups.

Irenaeus, whose interest it would be to ascribe non-apostolic practices to his enemies, only ascribes such innovations to one group of Valentinians: Marcus and his followers.²⁵⁵ His account of Marcosian ritual (1.13) strongly resembles the outsider criticism by Lucian that we saw in chapter 6.2.3 above. Irenaeus attacks Marcus in three ways. First, he accuses him of tricks:²⁵⁶

13.2 Pretending to give thanks over cups with mixed wine, and extending to great length the invocation, he makes them appear purple and red, so that *Grace* (who is one of those above all, is thought to drop her own blood into that cup through his invocation...

Secondly, Irenaeus claims that Marcus asked gullible women to consecrate the wine in a small cup that he subsequently poured into a larger cup. However, in secret he had already filled that second cup so that the additional wine from the smaller cup made it flow over, and his female followers were led to believe that *Grace* had 'multiplied the liquid'.²⁵⁷

Gullible women are also the topic of Irenaeus' third attack:

13.3 ... For mostly he occupies himself with women, and then those that are noble and antly attired, and of great wealth. ...

'I want you to participate from my *Grace* ... We should become one.... Adorn yourself as a bride ... establish the seed of light in your bridal chamber Receive from me the bridegroom... See how *Grace* has descended upon you; open your mouth and prophesy.'

But when the woman replies, 'I have never prophesied, and I do not know how to prophesy', he makes new invocations, to stupify the one he seduces, saying to her, 'Open your mouth, and just speak, and you will prophesy'.

²⁵⁵ Förster (1999), *Marcus*, pp 389-390, reconstructs his career as follows: Marcus was a pupil of Valentinus around 150 CE. In the 160s CE he travelled through Christian communities in Asia Minor, where he first was criticized. His pupils were active in the Christian communities of Gaul in the 170s CE. As is also shown in the case of Irenaeus himself, there was considerable interaction between Rome, Asia Minor and the Rhône Valley.

²⁵⁶ My translation.

²⁵⁷ Hippolytus, who seems largely dependent on Irenaeus, enlarges the ritual somewhat and suggests the use of chemicals (*Refutation* 6.35).

... Henceforth she sees herself as a prophetess... She does what is needed to reward him, not only by giving him her possessions (which is where his very large fortune comes from), but also by bodily communion and her desire to unite with him completely, in order to descend with him in the One.

Like Lucian, we see that Irenaeus does not describe immoral acts in the ritual; the alleged sexual seduction takes place behind the scenes. Irenaeus goes on to quote a number of stories about Marcus and his followers to make his claim credible. He also claims that they believe that the God of this world cannot judge them, as they have already received 'redemption', which secures the protection of divine grace and wisdom. Note that there is an initiatory element in the description of *Grace* both in the eucharist and in the idea of the bride.

The initiation ritual, called redemption, is the subject of 1.21. According to Irenaeus, the Marcosian redemption was an 'incomprehensible and invisible' mystery that 'each' teacher represents differently, as 'a denial of that baptism which is regeneration to God' and the Christian faith.²⁵⁸ According to Hippolytus, that denial should be seen in the sense that they administered a second baptism to baptised Christians, as if their first baptism had been invalid (or no more valid than the baptism of John for remission of sins).²⁵⁹ Irenaeus describes various forms:²⁶⁰

- 21.3. For some of them prepare a bridal chamber, and perform a sort of mystic rite (pronouncing certain expressions) with those who are being initiated, and affirm that it is a spiritual marriage...
- Others, again, lead them to a place where water is and baptise them with the utterance of these words,
 - i. 'Into the name of the unknown Father of the universe; into Truth, the mother of all things; into Him who descended upon Jesus; into union and redemption and communion with the powers'.
 - ii. Others still repeat certain Hebrew words, in order the more thoroughly to bewilder those who are being initiated...
 - iii. Others, again, set forth the redemption thus: '[Into] the name which is hidden from every deity and dominion, and [into] Truth ... [and into the name] of Christ...'

[the 'restoration':] '...psaua Jesus Nazaria...interpreted: ...may I enjoy your name, o Saviour of Truth!' Such are the words of the initiators; he who is initiated, replies, 'I am established, and I am redeemed; I redeem my soul from this Aeon...' Then the bystanders add these words, 'Peace be to all on whom this name rests.'

After this they anoint the initiated person with balsam; for they assert that this unguent is a type of that sweet odour which is above all things.
- 21.4 But there are some of them who assert that it is superfluous to bring persons to the water, but mixing oil and water together, they place this mixture on the heads of those who are to be initiated, with the use of some such expression as we have already mentioned. And this they maintain to be the redemption! They, too, are accustomed to anoint with balsam.
- Others, however, reject all these practices, and maintain that the mystery of the unspeakable and invisible power ought not to be performed by visible and corruptible creations... These hold that the knowledge of the unspeakable Greatness is itself perfect redemption.

²⁵⁸ 1.21.1

²⁵⁹ *Refutation* 6.36

²⁶⁰ ANF vol 1, pp 345-346, with emendations.

- 21.5 Others redeem dying persons at the moment of death, by placing on their heads oil and water, or the pre-mentioned ointment with water, using at the same time the above-named invocations...

In all cases, except the last, redemption takes place during the initiation ceremony. Some decorate the initiation room as a bridal chamber, a few reject all physical rituals. The three variants listed under the second point all involve baptism in the name of the 'Trinity'.

The bias in Irenaeus' description becomes clear when we look at his treatment of the same subject in a different context. In 3.15.2 his problem is not that Valentinians have different rituals, but that Valentinian rites resemble those of the church too closely. People are deceived by that similarity. Likewise, when he discusses the eucharist of the 'heretics' (presumably Valentinians and perhaps also the Marcionites) in 4.17.4-5, he criticizes not their rituals but their inconsistency:

But how can they be consistent with themselves, [when they say] that the bread over which thanks have been given is the body of their Lord, and the cup his blood...

The eucharistic prayer of these Valentinians resembles that of mainstream Christianity.²⁶¹ Irenaeus can only make this attack because many Valentinians, unlike Marcus, continued to celebrate mainstream Christian sacraments, giving thanks for the created bread and wine.

6.5.2 *Tertullian on Valentinian and Marcionite baptism*

Around 200 CE, Tertullian discusses Valentinian opinions in several treatises, including one with the title *Against the Valentinians*. It is interesting to see how he accuses them of imitating the Eleusian mysteries. But when he becomes more specific there is nothing in the ritual that he compares to the ritual of Eleusis. His criticism only regards the secrecy with which they guard the gnostic Christian interpretation of their rituals from outsiders and mainstream Christians. 'They have the knack of persuading men before instructing them.' (1). It seems that only after some time were people 'initiated into the entire fable' (3). But in all his railings against their many 'innovations' (4), Tertullian never accuses the Valentinians of innovating rituals, not even when he mocks the 'fraternal nuptials' of the divine syzygies in the *plerôma* (7 and at length in 32).

Also, when Tertullian speaks about Marcionite baptism, he essentially seems to assume a baptism no different from his own: people are immersed, sealed and receive the spirit.²⁶² It seems that the Marcionites he knew used the same elements as mainstream Christians: water to baptise, oil to anoint, milk and honey and bread.²⁶³ Only wine is not mentioned here as Marcion rejected the use of wine. This is in itself a very important fact for the study of Christian liturgy, because it indicates that the use of post-baptismal anointment and a cup of milk and honey may antedate the break with Marcion (144 CE in Rome).

²⁶¹ In Matthew, Mark and in I Corinthians 10:16 the 'giving of thanks' is mentioned for the cup only. In Luke this is over the bread as well. In the *Didache* there is the thanksgiving over the bread but not the formula 'this is my body'. A good early parallel is in the eucharistic prayer in the *Apostolic Tradition* 4.9: '[Jesus who] taking bread, giving thanks to Thee [God] said: Take, eat, this is my body...'

²⁶² *Against Marcion* 1.14

²⁶³ *Against Marcion* 1.28

6.5.3 *The dispute between Cyprian and Rome on re-baptism*

Further proof of similarity comes from a major dispute over re-baptising heretics around 250 CE. The case is quite clear in the combination of Eusebius' *History of the Church* and the many letters to and from another North African, Cyprian.²⁶⁴ In the preceding years, the Roman authorities had required Christians to sacrifice to the Emperor or face martyrdom. Many, even bishops and presbyters, had sacrificed and were therefore banned from office. Some of these refused to give up their positions and broke with the church. After the persecutions, another problem arose when Novatian, a Roman presbyter with allegedly the ambition to become a bishop, advocated a complete ban of all believers who had sacrificed. A synod condemned his harsh position. He then organized his own church and, as its bishop, won over many clergy for various reasons. Over a number of years, these outside churches baptised believers. In order to win them back, Stephen, the bishop of Rome, lowered the threshold (72.24).²⁶⁵ He wrote a letter stating that people who had been baptised by schismatics or heretics in the name of the Trinity and had rejoined the Catholic Church did not have to be rebaptised (73.2). Upon admission, the bishop should lay hands on them and invite the Holy Spirit. He based himself on the example of Acts 8, which came to be interpreted as baptism by a deacon (Philip) without an order from the bishop (Peter). Therefore, the Holy Spirit did not descend until the authorized bishop laid his hands on the believers (72.9). Another argument he used was the precedent that this procedure also applied to followers of Marcion, Apelles and Valentinus (73.7) coming back to the church (72.4,23).²⁶⁶ He said that these sects also accepted each other's baptism (73.1,4).

A number of bishops believed that such rulings could only be made by a synod. Cyprian convened such a synod in North Africa. It ruled that baptisms undergone outside the Catholic Church are not baptisms (69.1). On both sides of the debate, people seem to have assumed that in many cases the rites of baptism, chrism, and eucharist were essentially the same (69.2). But – as Cyprian said – they cannot be taken as baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit if Marcionites and others claim to worship a different Father (72.5). It seems that the rites of most Marcionites and Valentinians fitted well within the range of mainstream Christian practices. Also bishop Firmilian from Cappadocia, supported Cyprian's position. In his letter to Cyprian, Firmilian speaks of diversity (74.6).²⁶⁷

But that they who are in Rome do not observe those things in all cases which are *handed down* from the beginning, and vainly pretend the authority of the *apostles*; any one may know also from the fact, that concerning the celebration of Easter,²⁶⁸ and concerning many other sacraments of divine matters, he may see that there are some

²⁶⁴ In addition to Tertullian, Cyprian's letters pass on a few items about North African baptism. He leaves us a description of his personal experience with baptism (1.4). We learn how newborn babies are kissed as well when they are baptised (58.4). The post-baptismal anointing is now simply called 'the chrism' (69.2). He warns against the practice of some Christians who replace the cup of wine mixed with water with a cup with water only (62).

²⁶⁵ See *Epistles of Cyprian* 71 (to Stephen) and 72 (with quotes from Stephen's letter).

²⁶⁶ In 72.4 Cyprian extends the lists with Patropassians (Sabellians), Anthropians and Ophites, but this seems rhetorical exaggeration. In 73.7 Stephen mentions by name only Valentinians, Marcionites and Appeletians (a branch of Marcionites). Later, Augustine also seems to assume that the conflict involved Marcionites and Valentinians who supposedly baptised 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost' (*On Baptism*, 3.15-20).

²⁶⁷ ANF vol 5, p 391.

²⁶⁸ The second century Roman bishop Victor attempted to impose dating by the Roman calendar on the churches in Asia Minor, but ultimately the conflict was resolved through the mediation of Irenaeus; see Eusebius *Church History* 5.24.

diversities among them, and that all things are not observed by them alike, which are observed at Jerusalem, just as in very many other provinces also many things are varied because of the difference in places and <men>. And yet on this account there is no departure at all from the peace and unity of the Catholic Church.

It is tempting to read in ‘handed down’ and the authority of the ‘apostles’ a critique on some work from the Roman church like the *Apostolic Tradition*. But how big a difference in ritual was there between Rome and Jerusalem? Firmilian is only explicit about the date of Easter. It is important to note the prestige and presumed antiquity of the Jerusalem rites. This prestige makes it unlikely that the Jerusalem rites in the fourth century were radically changed. The fourth century ritual of Cyril of Jerusalem differs from the Roman rite only in details not in structure; the biggest difference is perhaps the cup of milk and honey, which seems lacking in Jerusalem.

6.6 Redemption and the bridal chamber

In chapter 5.2.6 above, I concluded that the visible mysteries in this world were only baptism/chrisam and eucharist, while redemption and bridal chamber should be seen as mysteries of a different order. In the sections above, we have found that other Valentinian sources agree with this. The remaining question regards the background of the use of the terms ‘redemption’ and ‘bridal chamber’ as divine mysteries outside Valentinian discourse.

6.6.1 Redemption

The Coptic *sote* translates the Greek *apolutrosis*, which means ransom or ransom money. It can be used to pay the price in the case of a crime, or to redeem people who were taken captive by robbers or foreign powers. It is not a typically religious term in Hellenistic or Jewish thinking. There is one exception, the verb to ransom (*lutro*) is used in relation to salvation by God in the Greek text of the apocryphal book *Jesus Sirach* (48:20, 49:10, 50:24 and 51:2). This Greek translation was made in Alexandria between 130 and 100 BCE. Philo (40 CE) applies the flight of Jacob, Leah and Rachel from Laban (Genesis 31) categorically to the emancipation of the soul.²⁶⁹ In mainstream Christianity, Christ ransoms sinners. In Valentinian interpretation, Christ ransoms people from the evil powers who took them captive. This idea is present in *GPhil* as well (§9).

According to Irenaeus, Valentinians practised a rite of redemption that in most cases is to be associated with baptism, and sometimes with a rite for the dying. This is in line with the use of the word in the New Testament. *Apolutrosis* is used ten times in the New Testament, once in a general sense (Heb 11:35), five times referring back to the redemption brought by Jesus (Ro 3:24, 1Co 1:30, Eph 1:7, Col 1:14, Heb 9:15), and four times referring to future redemption (Lk 21:28, Ro 8:23, Eph 1:14, 4:30). Believers obtain redemption (potentially) in baptism, when they are baptised by Jesus and sealed by the Holy Spirit. Redemption becomes actual when they die and becomes general upon the last day.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ *Legum Allegoriae*, 3:21, see also the allegorical interpretation of the righteous in Sodom in *De congressu [quaerendae] eruditionis gratia* 109.

²⁷⁰ The difference between potential and actual is explicitly stated by Augustine: ‘Have we not been regenerated, adopted, and redeemed by the holy washing? And yet there remains a regeneration, an adoption, a redemption, which we ought now patiently to be waiting for as to come in the end, that we may then be in no degree any longer children of this world.’ *Against two letters of the Pelagians* 3.5

The word *apolutrosis* is phonetically easily associated with both applications: *apolouo* (washing) is associated with baptism (Ac 22:16, 1Co 6:11); *apolyo* (letting go) is used for releasing prisoners (like Barsabbas in the synoptic Gospels), which in gnostic Christian interpretation could easily be associated with the release of the soul from its bodily prison. There are many patristic writings in which redemption is related to baptism. Around 200 CE, Clement describes baptism as ‘the seal and redemption’.²⁷¹ Basil calls it ‘the baptism of redemption’.²⁷²

6.6.2 The Bridal chamber

GPhil uses a number of words to refer to the mystery of the bridal chamber. *Nymphôn* is the word used most frequently and also in some key passages (like §68).²⁷³ It is often best translated as the room in which the marriage feast takes place. *Gamos* is also used, which may refer to marriage in general, to the wedding feast or even to the wedding banquet. The bedroom is sometimes referred to as *koiton* (sometimes it simply means bed), and sometimes as *pastos*, a rare word derived from the curtain that separated the room of a married couple from the rest of the house. The theme of a marriage feast is well known in the Gospels, where the authors use the bridegroom as an image of Jesus and the believers as his guests (e.g. Matthew 22 and 25). In the Epistles (e.g. Eph 5:32) and especially the book of Revelation, we learn that the church is to be seen as the bride of Christ. In patristic writings the soul of the individual believer is often depicted as a bride of Christ (see the quotes from Cyril and Ambrose in 5.3.3). In Cyril’s *Mystagogical Catecheses*, he contrasts the outer chamber (the vestibule 1.11) to the inner chamber (the baptistery 2.1) and calls the candidates the ‘sons of the *nymphôn*’ (4.2). In his *Catechetical Lectures*, he says that Christ came forth from a bride-chamber (9.6 and 12.25) and that the initiands are called to the bride-chamber (3.2 with reference to Song of Songs 1:4) where they may sing the bridal song (1.1). Bridal imagery abounds in baptismal hymns from Ephrem,²⁷⁴ and also in the *Odes of Solomon*.

There are many Hellenistic and Jewish parallels to bridal or marriage mysticism. In the Hebrew bible, bridal imagery is used to describe the relationship between God and Israel. More often, however, we see that ‘adultery’ with foreign gods and rites is condemned and some of these rites could include sexually enacted rituals. This may be the reason why bridal mysticism does not play a major role in Qumran literature, nor in writings from Hellenistic Judaism literature pre-dating the destruction of the temple.²⁷⁵ It becomes much more important, however, from the second century onward, after rabbi Akiva interpreted the *Song of Songs* in a mystical way.²⁷⁶

A number of mystery cults started off as agricultural rites intended to improve the fertility of land, livestock and people. Sexual symbols were present in many mysteries, including presentations of sacred marriages (often between gods).

²⁷¹ *Who is the rich man that shall be saved?* 39.

²⁷² *On the Spirit* 55 (24).

²⁷³ *Nymphôn* is used 19 times; when we include *nymphios* and *nymphe* we arrive at a total of 30 times. *Gamos* is used 12 times, *pastos* 10 times and *koiton* 4 times.

²⁷⁴ For example *Hymns for Epiphany* 13.1-3: ‘Your garments glisten, my brethren, as snow; and fair is your shining in the likeness of Angels! In the likeness of Angels, you have come up, beloved, from Jordan’s river, in the armour of the Holy Ghost. The bridal chamber that fails not, my brethren, you have received.’; 13.12-13 ‘...you He makes glad, in the bridal chamber of joy... Who would not rejoice, in your bridal chamber, my brethren?’; 7.9 ‘You who are baptised, receive your lamps...’; 7.22 ‘... from the water you have been clad in light.’

²⁷⁵ A heavenly bridal chamber is mentioned in *Joseph and Aseneth* 15.7; which, however, assumes no ritual or mystical significance; Chestnutt (1995), *Death to Life*, p 253.

²⁷⁶ Dan (1993), *Jewish Mysticism*, p 32.

Sometimes cults were accused of immoral acts in their mysteries. Mainstream and gnostic Christians also suffered such allegations. In most cases these accusations are biased outsider reports. The idea of a mystical union between the believer or the soul with the divine came to underlie most mystery religions. In fact, a general trend can be discerned in late-antique Hellenistic philosophy wherein myth and ritual was interpreted from this perspective.

Are the roots of the term ‘bridal chamber’ in *GPhil* Hellenistic, Jewish or Christian? I suggest that the answer lies in the expression ‘children of the bridal chamber (*nymphôn*)’, a Semitism for ‘wedding guests’. *GPhil* uses it five times in this sense, more than any other document. We find the expression used first in Mark 2:19, and retained in Matthew 9:15 and Luke 5:34, perhaps as a technical term. In our gospel texts, the expression ‘children of the bridal chamber’ is used for the followers of Jesus. Cyril of Jerusalem uses the term once for his initiates, when he discusses the eucharist.²⁷⁷ Understandably, this expression was linked to initiation: In Matthew 22 the guests are required to wear bridal clothes, in Revelation 7:14, we see that these are white clothes, washed in the blood of the Lamb. In Matthew 25, the virgins need burning oil lamps, which in baptismal instructions is taken as a reference to the chrism with olive oil or to the lamps/candles that the newly initiated carried after baptism. In both parables there is a banquet, which is easily associated with the eucharist. Through repeatedly partaking of the eucharist, believers develop from newborn children into perfect adults.²⁷⁸ Likewise, the ‘co-brothers of the bridal chamber’ in the Valentinian inscription quoted in chapter 1.1 celebrate the baths, the lights, and the banquet.²⁷⁹ Therefore, while mystical bridal imagery fits in with both Hellenistic and Christian contexts, the term ‘children of the bridal chamber’ can best be regarded as early Christian.

6.6.3 *The relationship between the visible and the hidden mysteries*

As we saw in chapter 5.2 above, redemption can be understood as the ascent of the soul, and the bridal chamber as the unification with the divine. In the *Tripartite Tractate*, redemption means the release of the soul out of its bodily imprisonment (117.23), an escape from the evil powers and ‘an ascent to the degrees which are in the *plerôma*’ (124). The idea of an ascent of the soul and unification with the divine is well known in late antique Hellenistic philosophy. It can be the result of philosophical contemplation (the route preferred by Plato and Plotinus), but it can also be the result of ritual theurgy, as is implicit in Plutarch and explicit in Iamblichus. When people perform certain rituals properly, Iamblichus sees the divine at work ‘calling their souls upward into themselves, providing for the union to themselves...’ and ‘a safe return of the soul ... and likewise a union with the divine first cause.’²⁸⁰ Both Plutarch and Iamblichus explain Egyptian ritual from this perspective, which is arguably more suited to this line of explanation than the original Graeco-Roman fertility rites. But this Egyptian influence may also have led to an element of fear in the ascent. During its ascent, the soul has to pass gates, give answers and passwords to pass safely past the evil powers. This we see also in the ‘other’ *Gospel of Philip* quoted by Epiphanius. Mainstream Christian writers first criticized gnostic Christians for

²⁷⁷ *Lecture 22.2 or On the Mysteries 4.2.*

²⁷⁸ We see a similar series when Clement writes: ‘Being baptised, we are illumination; illuminated we become sons; being made sons, we are made perfect; being made perfect, we are immortal.’ *Instructor* 1.6.

²⁷⁹ ‘Co-brothers of the bridal chambers, celebrate with torches the baths for me; they hunger for banquets in our rooms...’ The word ‘co-brothers’ is used in stead of brothers or children to fit the sentence into the metre.

²⁸⁰ *De Mysteriis 4.* Translation: Alexander Wilder

accepting Hellenistic philosophy as a basis for interpreting scriptures. But this changed after Christianity became a dominant religion in the fourth century and received a large influx of Hellenistic intellectuals. In the fifth century, pseudo-Dionysius comes to a similar understanding when he writes in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*:

Every sacredly initiating operation draws our fragmented lives together into a one-like divinization. It forges a divine unity out of the divisions within us. It grants us communion and union with the One. 424 C/D

From scripture it has been shown that the sacred divine birth is a purification and an illuminating enlightenment; that the sacraments of the synaxis and of the myron-oointment provide a perfecting knowledge and understanding of the divine workings; and that it is through this that there is effected both: the unifying uplifting toward the divinity and the most blessed communion with it. 504B/C²⁸¹

6.7 Conclusion

The initiation rite in *GPhil* is Valentinian and not Sethian. Within the range of Valentinian practices, it belongs to those baptism rituals that were close to the western rites of mainstream Christianity. While the initiation ceremonies of other gnostic Christians may at times have been a fusion of elements from Christian baptism and mystery cults, *GPhil* has taken no ritual elements from the mystery cults, or for that matter from Jewish initiation, that were not also adopted by mainstream Christianity. ‘Redemption’ and the ‘bridal chamber’ are Christian terms for the late Hellenistic concepts of the ascent of the soul and the unification with the divine.

²⁸¹ As in *GPhil*, there are three visible sacraments: Divine birth (Baptism); Synaxis (Eucharist); Myron-oointment (Chrismation, also for initiating priests). These three enable the two hidden mysteries: Uplifting (Redemption) and Communion (Bridal Chamber).

